

THE RESPONSE TO PARIZEAU'S "ETHNIC VOTE"

BY JEREMY WEBBER

Jacques Parizeau's referendum-night speech has dominated much of the subsequent debate. In those remarks, he blamed "money and the ethnic vote" for the Yes defeat. More important, he made clear that, for him, the "nous" québécois — the consummate political actor of Quebec's national life — consisted solely of Quebecers of French mother tongue. This group alone made up "ce que nous sommes."

His comments were significant and revealing. They gave renewed voice to the current of ethnic nationalism that persists in Quebec, despite some sovereigntists' attempts to rephrase their goal in civic nationalist terms. They pushed two crucial questions to the fore: How important is ethnic nationalism to the Parti québécois's vision? How important is it to Quebecers' demands for cultural accommodation generally? And, of course, those lead to a third practical question: How should we respond to comments like Parizeau's?

Although the questions are crucial, most of the answers have been inadequate, if not pernicious. I will look here at two common responses — one, from the sovereigntist movement; the other from outside Quebec.

THE RESPONSE FROM THE SOVEREIGNTISTS

Some sovereigntist commentators — Alain Gagnon, for example — quickly and vigorously denounced Parizeau's remarks. And, of course, Parizeau's remarks contributed to his resignation. For many, however, the dominant note was one of excuse: "Parizeau was

tired, or profoundly frustrated at the defeat of his option." The excuses were often combined with attempts to minimize the remarks: "Parizeau was drawing attention to the mere fact that the vast majority of non-francophones vote 'no,'" or "If he was doing more, he was not representative of mainstream sovereigntists, only of an extreme fringe."

These responses betray an impressive ignorance of the meaning of Parizeau's remarks, or at least a strong desire on the commentators' part to avoid their implications.

To begin with, Parizeau was not indulging in voting analysis. His remarks were about membership. He defined those who count: those Quebecers whose political will mattered, those who made up "ce que nous sommes." And that, combined with his assertion that non-francophone "yes" votes were no longer necessary, testified eloquently to the fact that, for him, all the talk of an open and pluralistic nationalism had been a ruse — a way of appealing, when necessary, to voters beyond the true "people."

Nor were his remarks a slip. In his opening words, he expressly raised the civic nationalist's phrase for Quebecers of French mother tongue — "québécois francophones" — and threw it away in favour of the restrictive "nous." It was a conscious rejection — a deliberate stripping away of the mask.

ETHNIC NATIONALISM: STILL A FORCE?

How representative were Parizeau's remarks? In recent years, sovereigntist intellectuals have, indeed, been banishing ethno-

nationalism, rhetorically, to the fringes. As a result, the language of civic nationalism has tended to dominate sovereigntist intellectual discourse.

But Parizeau is hardly on the fringe. He was the premier of Quebec, the leader of the No committee, the person generally credited with the resurgence of separatism in Quebec. There have been other comments throughout the debate, from many participants, that expressed similar views. That was, after all, one of the main

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problems with Lucien Bouchard's assertion that Quebecers were one of the "races blanches" with the lowest birthrate in the world. On any civic definition, Quebecers are not a "race blanche" (and Bouchard's suggestion that this was a "technical term" is laughable). More than once, we heard from sovereigntists that non-francophones should respect the will of the "majority" — not the majority of electors, but a majority of the majority whose first language is French.

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of sovereigntist intellectuals is representative of their movement. It often seems more like the age-old strategy of moral argument in which one attempts to persuade people to be virtuous by asserting that they are so already.

At the popular level, the sovereigntists' appeal is much more visceral. Bouchard's rhetorical power came not from paeans to openness and pluralism, but from innovations of grievance and humiliation at the hands of "le Canada anglais." How different is this from humiliation at the hands of "les anglais"? In response, we heard once again the chants of "Le Québec aux québécois." Who really believes that in that phrase, québécois includes a Quebecer like me?

CIVIC NATIONALISM

The point is that the sovereignty movement has always had a powerful strain of old-style nationalism. That strain has been partially submerged by the recent shift in nationalist discourse, but it has not disappeared, nor has it been reduced to a fringe. In that context, it is worrying to see attempts to excuse or minimize Parizeau's comments. The lack of strong public denunciation — the unwillingness even to acknowledge the prevalence of such views within the movement — throws into question the depth of the commitment to civic nationalism. Indeed, without more, how do we know the extent to which civic nationalism — as opposed to the premier's tactical stupidity — was responsible for Parizeau's resignation?

The sovereigntist movement is a blend of ethnic, cultural, and civic nationalisms. Some activists tend more toward one, some toward another, but all join in the alliance for sovereignty. The muted response to Parizeau's comments

reveals that, for many, commitment to that alliance strongly conditions whatever commitment they have to civic nationalism. If they are willing to dampen their criticism of ethno-nationalists now, what hope is there for Quebec after a vote for independence when anglo migration and economic hardship increase the pressure to find scapegoats?

THE RESPONSE FROM OUTSIDE QUEBEC

Strangely, much of that reaction has adopted a similarly simplistic and monolithic conception of Quebec. Parizeau's remarks are taken as representing the aspirations of all French-speaking Quebec, as revealing the ethno-nationalism supposedly present in all demands for cultural recognition. The only solution, then, is to hold the line, strongly resisting any concessions.

At the very least, this shows profound ignorance of the state of public opinion in Quebec. After all, a majority of Quebecers voted "no." Many who voted "yes" did so in order to signal their desire for constitutional reform. The clear majority of Quebecers, then, had no sympathy whatever with Parizeau's comments. But many Canadians were unable to see past him. For them, he was the voice of all Quebecers dissatisfied with the status quo.

This has created a regrettable and artificial polarization in which every proposal for change is treated as a concession to ethno-nationalism. It ignores the voices of federalists in Quebec. Indeed, it reveals a fundamental blindness of many Canadians to the relevance of culture in their own lives. Often, they care deeply about Canadian culture without believing that that makes them closed or intolerant. Why can they not see that the same holds true for many Quebecers, legitimately

concerned with affirming their own distinctiveness?

We should listen to what those Quebecers are telling us, rather than damning all as ethno-nationalists, open or disguised. I agree that we cannot appease ethno-nationalism. But we should not lose sight of the

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majority of Quebecers who are not in that camp. Too often, the reaction outside Quebec reminds me of the William Howard Taft approach to trade unions where one is so mesmerized by the fear of communism that one is incapable of responding constructively to the real demands of want and penury.

Most Quebecers support an accommodation within Canada. They do so precisely because they want to live within a multilingual and pluralistic state. That very framework constitutes an important check on ethnic nationalism. We should recognize that and attempt to find solutions within that framework. And any such solution has to speak to that great body of Quebecers, not play the ethno-nationalists' game by taking them as representative of the whole. ♦

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PLEASE, LET US BREATHE

BY LOUIS BALTHAZAR

Nothing was more typical of the chronic misunderstanding between English Canada and Quebec than the pre-referendum Montreal rally. Those 1,000 Canadians who invaded the streets of Quebec's metropolis were undoubtedly inspired by genuine feelings of goodwill toward Quebecers, by a strong Canadian nationalism and a conviction that Canada must include Quebec if it is going to make any sense. The effect on French-speaking Quebecers, however, was minimal at best.

KISSY, KISSY: THANKS, BUT NO THANKS

For those who thought of voting "yes," this last-minute demonstration of love was seen as condescending, superficial, and insignificant as long as it was not accompanied by any sign of recognition of Quebec for what it is or should be: an autonomous political entity. What kind of love is it that does not allow the partner to be itself, to be distinctive? For most Quebecers, this tight embrace was unbearably suffocating, hardly allowing us to breathe.

Sure, we are attached to Canada. Sure, we like English-speaking Canadians and want nothing more than to maintain our various relations and friendships with people all across the country. But there is such a thing as a distinct Quebec network. It includes all anglophones and allophones who live in Quebec and share in the distinctive mix of a common public culture while retaining their own particular features. Notwithstanding Premier Parizeau's unfortunate words and the misinterpreted occasional linguistic mishaps on the part of

some Quebec leaders, the dynamism of Quebec nationalism is definitely pluralistic, multi-ethnic, and faithful to the spirit of our 1975 *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*.

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Our pluralism is different from Canadian multiculturalism. This is why the great majority of Quebecers have repudiated for quite some time the all-inclusive Canadian nationalism that was cultivated by Pierre Elliott Trudeau and espoused by many Canadians outside Quebec. It is sad to say to our good friends across the country that we cannot respond to their invitation to belong to a symmetric and indissoluble Canada. We have to repeat again and again: "We want to be with you, but we don't want to be part of you." Fortunately, there are some Canadians who understand this message. William Thorsell, editor-in-chief of *The Globe and Mail*, has shown himself to be more enlightened than many of his colleagues when he wrote beautifully:

The fact that our solitudes come to "protect and touch and

Please, Let Us Breathe, continued on page 36